Economic imaginaries of the global middle ages

Yarrow, Simon

Economic Imaginaries of the Global Middle Ages

'A global economic history can even less afford to ignore 'culture' in the sense of knowledge, rules of conduct and value-orientations than economic history in a national mode'.[1]

This chapter explores two related prospects for the 'global middle ages': first, the loosening of conceptual ties in which modern historiography binds the middle ages;[2] and, second, the reframing of the middle ages of conventional western historiography as a global phenomenon.[3] It considers examples of the relationship between governance and wealth at intersections of culture-political and socio-economic history, and will explore 'medieval globality' as the unfolding of collective imaginaries in tension with diffuse local and entangled modes of evaluative agency. What constitutes value and who says so? It is scarcely

[2] See Carol Symes, 'When We Talk about Modernity', *The American Historical Review*, cxvi (2011), 715-26.

[3] For important ground work to this end, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000).

credible that those periods currently circumscribed as 'modern' and 'medieval' can survive scrutiny from the perspective of global history. It is one thing, however, to spot the tyranny of a construct; another, by changing old habits, to erase it.[4] A global approach should help to expose the illusory differences encoded in this binary, as we find more fruitful differences *within* and *across* their constituent elements.[5] It should also reveal the immense variety of ways in which people across different periods and in different regions have thought about and experienced 'economy'. If this is a term which is to be part of the global historian's lexicon, it is important that we acknowledge that exceptional range of economic thought and experience. It is a range which renders the western-capitalist variant merely one of many modes of thinking and acting economically rather than the singular framework within which all societies, premodern and modern, are to be interpreted.

The ways in which secular constitutionalism and liberal historicism have fixed upon the uniqueness of European capitalism – its definition, origins, and rise – as the backbone of grand narratives of transition, divergence, and modernization, have been elucidated in

---

[4] Timothy Reuter, 'Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct', in Reuter, *Medieval Polities and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet Nelson (Cambridge, 2006), 19-37.

[5] My use of 'medieval' and 'middle ages' in this chapter should be assumed to be in scare quotes, and be contrasted with 'medieval globality', which refers to that which might emerge from a fresh look at this period. I hold out little hope of the global middle ages being recovered on its own terms, but I do not see why much fruitful work by leading South Asianists recovering multiple modernities in an early modern, precolonial moment might not be extended into a 'late-premodern' or 'very early modern' world. See Strathern in this volume.

Chakrabarty's study of the influence on western historiography of Adam Smith's classical account of political economy and Marx's subsequent critique. Their influence on historiography and the social sciences have made for a peculiarly narrow modern-Western view of the historical relationship between governance and wealth, the extent of whose colonizing effects on both the medieval and the non-European past have only relatively recently become apparent to scholars.[6] Any exploration of medieval globality becomes partly dependent on a cultural critique of conventional frameworks derived from national and colonial teleological foundations. Such an approach may help us to avoid the reduction of the global middle ages to some infant precursor to modern globalization, understood as increasing market integration, price convergence, the free flow of commodities, labour, and capital, and growth recurring.

Two early revisionist contributions, working broadly within but pointing beyond this tradition, have been offered by Janet Abu-Lughod and Christopher Bayly. Janet Abu-Lughod gathered abundant evidence of global medieval connectedness almost thirty years ago in her description of a complex world system of eight overlapping trade circuits spanning Eurasia and North and West Africa between c.1250 and c.1350 (Map 8). It was distinguished by cultural and political polycentrism, involving long distance trade between regional powers, aided by smaller societies, and with no evidence of the cultural exceptionalism associated with its modern successor, whether understood in terms of Weberian psychology,

---

[6] Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia, 2008); Bruce W. Holsinger, 'Medieval Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and the Genealogies of Critique', *Speculum*, lxxvii (2002) 1195-227; Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in The Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2018), and n. 2 above.

institutional optimalities, 'religious beliefs and values', or any other designations of western civilization.[7] Despite her immense contribution to the recovery of an Islamicate world system, which has encouraged some to explore a history of Islamic capitalism,[8] her intention was not to supplant Immanuel Wallerstein's account of the modern world system, but rather to check assumptions that his system had pristine western origins.[9]

Christopher Bayly's account of 'archaic globalization' for the period spanning these contrasting world systems, between 1300 and 1800, similarly emphasized the processual and cannibalistic nature of western globalization. Bayly described a period of increasing connectivity, and the eventual incorporation and subordination of local globalizing agencies to larger European colonial and capitalist operations across ever-widening circuits. In place of nations and political economy he adopted ideologies and consumption patterns as themes for understanding connectedness. According to Bayly, this phase of globalization was driven by prevalent epistemological commitments to cosmic kingship, universal religion and humoral understandings of the body. The principal role as economic actors played by imperial and state formations enabled middle-range institutions to operate within, parasitically upon, and beyond (at a distance from) state infrastructures through nomads and

---

[7] Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (Cambridge, 1989), 354.

[8] John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge, 2004); Jairus Banaji, 'Islam, the Mediterranean and the Rise of Capitalism', *Historical Materialism*, xv (2007) 47–74; Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule. The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism* (London, 2015).

[9] Rather, it was in part also to show how systems theories must take account of the fact that the 'East fell before the West rose'; on Wallerstein, see Holmes and Standen in this volume, p. 00.

bandits, monastic orders, itinerant religious devotees, camel caravans, seaborne merchants, pilgrims and pirates.[10]

Both these approaches usefully stressed the global implications of relations between socio-economic arrangements and the culture-political in what might be called 'a very early modern' or 'late premodern' (as experimental alternatives to a 'medieval') context.[11] Bayly's account avoids the canalizing effect that network approaches can have on what are complex and textured cultural and social links, but he is more attentive in his model of archaic globalization to cultural consumption than to the production of meaning highlighted in the culturally pluralistic world system evoked by Abu-Lughod.[12] The production of meaning and value that takes place at that imaginative junction between governance and wealth, of which classical western political economy is only one formulation among others, is one possible way of exploring medieval globality.

1. Relativizing Political Economy

We might usefully cast political economy not as a social science but as an example of mythopoesis. Situated literary readings of modern Europe's social science antecedents have

---

[10] A similar point is made for 'at least until the middle of the nineteenth century' by Michael Geyer and Charles Bright, 'World History in a Global Age' *American Historical Review*, c (1995), 1045.

[11] On these terms see also above note 5.

[12] Christopher Bayly, ''Archaic and 'Modern' Globalization in the Eurasian and African Arena, 1750-1850', in A. G. Hopkins (ed.), *Globalization in World History* (London, 2002), 47-73.

helped make visible their distorting and obscuring teleologies.[13] For example, Kathryn

Sutherland has described the 'civic moralism' of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* as a form

of myth-making, the rhetorical equivalent of a free market in 'different modes of saying, in

which discourses of history, literature, anthropology, and ethical and scientific description

compete and are exchanged'.[14] Mike Hill and Warren Montag build on theological readings

of Adam Smith, noting in his 'invisible hand' a benign providence at work in markets

unbridled by the state, where his heroes, entrepreneurial artisans, traders, and gentleman-

investors, find personal moral and material enrichment through an immanent 'oeconomy of

nature' that underwrites individual and national prosperity.[15]

The conventional attribution of the 'discovery' of natural economic laws to Smith would

have galled medieval Arab-Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali, Ibn Taimiyya, and Ibn Khaldun,

whose acute understandings of market forces matched his, even though they were articulated

in different scriptural and moral frameworks.[16] Nor should it escape our notice that

ideological work on behalf of a 'clash of civilizations' narrative obscures the descent of

Smith's 'oeconomy of nature' from a Christian morality crystallized in the work of Thomas

---

[13] See Andrew Cole and D. Vance Smith (eds.), *The Legitimacy of the Middle Ages. On the Unwritten History of Theory* (Durham, NC, 2010); Henning Trüper, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds.), *Historical Teleologies in the Modern World* (London, 2015).

[14] Adam Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, ed. Kathryn Sutherland (Oxford, 1993), xliv.

[15] Mike Hill and Warren Montag, *The Other Adam Smith* (Stanford, 2015).

[16] See, for example, Shaikh M. Ghazanfar (ed.), *Medieval Islamic Economic Thought. Filling the 'Great Gap' in European Economics* (London, 2003); Hamid Hosseini, 'Seeking the Roots of Adam Smith's Division of Labour in Medieval Persia', *History of Political Economy* xxx (1998), 653-81.

Aquinas, that itself had depended on Arabic translations of Greek philosophy.[17] Giorgio Agamben has similarly traced the providential core of the political economy of Smith and his interlocutors back to the thought of Aristotle and Xenophon, to whom the term *oikonomia* denoted 'household governance'. Agamben shows how the idea percolated through medieval Christian scholarship into a theology of the divine government of the world enacted through the Trinity.[18]

The role of the state is famously downplayed, though not wholly abandoned, in Smith's account of governance and wealth, but is something Marx reasserts in his interpretation of primitive accumulation as a form of surplus extraction. But Marx's use of feudalism and capitalism as developmental stages in history, and his etiolated theory of culture-politics,[19] limits our view of the global varieties of political economy that existed in the premodern world, notwithstanding talk of Asiatic or hydraulic modes of production.[20] We might suspect that other types of economic imaginary were generative of different kinds of connectedness, and that these hollowed out, fed off, or dissolved those globalizing tendencies and characteristics that liberal historicists are conditioned to detect and narrate, whether those of

---

[17] Shaikh M. Ghazanfar, 'The Economic Thought of Abu-Hamid Al Ghazali and St Thomas Aquinas', in *Medieval Islamic and Economic Thought*, 184-208.

[18] Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory. For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. L. Chiesa (Stanford, 2011).

[19] Gareth Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx. Greatness and Illusion* (London, 2016), 395.

[20] Chris Wickham, 'Memories of Under-Development: What Has Marxism Done for Medieval History, and What Can It Still Do?' in Chris Wickham (ed.), *Marxist History-Writing For the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2007), 32-48; Reuter, 'Another Tyrannous Construct?'

conventional political economy or its materialist critiques.[21] Religions, cultures or exegetical technologies – including here writing, gift exchange and embodiment – might help us to parse the various articulations of governance and wealth that lent impulse and energy to medieval globalities.

2. Economic Imaginaries

I borrow the germane phrase 'economic imaginary' from Tamara Chin's recent examination of classical Confucian writings and material cultures of Han China (206 BCE-220 CE). I gloss the term here as a historically situated complex of literary and material discourses productive of meta-narrative themes of theodicy, providence, governance and identity, rendering them legible, reproducible and contestable in concrete terms. Chin's book, *Savage Exchange*, is a highly nuanced study of an extended moment of rumination among Han China's ruling elite (and especially during the reign of Emperor Wu in the first century BCE) over the relationship between governance and the increased economic and cultural exchange then occurring across the imperial frontier (Map 3).[22] Emerging from this literature, and subsequently canonized in Chinese political culture, was the story of the 'Tribute of Yu', part of the *Book of Documents,* one of the Confucian classics.[23] It detailed the 'tributary model of imperial China', the expression of what Chin calls 'a hierarchical and centrally organized

---

[21] Andrew Sartori, 'Global intellectual History and Political Economy', in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (Columbia, 2013), 110-33.

[22] Tamara Chin, *Savage Exchange. Han Imperialism, Chinese Literary Style, and the Economic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 2014).

[23] See Michael Nylan, *The Five "Confucian" Classics* (New Haven, 2001), 123-36, for the origins, content and dating of the *Documents*.

agricultural world order'.[24] Chin crucially shows how mixed analyses of market and tributary systems were an important part of these classical reflections, and remained grounds for subsequent debate about imperial policy, despite the tributary system's primacy as a Confucian myth of political and moral authority.

The *qingzhong* 輕重 theorists, among them Sima Qian, argued for state control of the frontier markets through monitoring and manipulation of the money supply. These took a quantitative and market-oriented view of cross-cultural relationships between those societies the tributary model identified as 'barbarian' and 'civilized'. The victory of tribute over more 'Smithian' ideas had implications for normative social roles and domestic order including, for example, women's labour in textiles. The market-oriented group upset the cultural politics of tribute through which male heads of households, by symbolically rendering grain and other agricultural produce to imperial agents, re-enacted domestic hierarchies. Chin here draws attention, not to the modern resonance of certain ideas found in this literature, but rather to the significance of its presence in the 'economic imaginary' of its own times. Her aim is not to trace the origins of the European political economy, but rather the 'what-ifs' of Han literary and material culture. In addition to a model of production and exchange, Chin's approach powerfully contributes to the recovery of the meaning, form and affect of a non-European classical understanding of wealth and governance emergent from the 'Silk Roads of the mind'.[25]

Literary culture and political cognition are the subjects of another 'quasi-global' order that Sheldon Pollock has, by naming it, brought into historiographical being: the 'Sanskrit

---

[24] Chin, *Savage Exchange*, 13.

[25] Tamara Chin, 'The Invention of the Silk Road, 1877', *Critical Inquiry*, xl (2013) 194–219.

cosmopolis'.[26] For the first millennium CE, he has traced the supra-regional literarization of

Sanskrit in the service of a political imagination; a language hitherto reserved for religion,

which eventually spread geographically from Afghanistan to Java. After observing broad

similarities between this and the formation of a Latin cosmopolis over the same period,

Pollock insists on Sanskrit's cosmological character as a process of accommodation between

rajya (royal power) and *kavya* (literary culture),[27] noting that *jagat*, the idea of 'all that

moves with life', was far removed from universal ideas of territorial dominion engrained in

Latin notions of Roman *imperium*. Both of these cosmopolitan 'culture-political' forms, he

argues, ceded imaginative ground to imitative processes of literary vernacularization around

the year 1000 CE. These were characterized by the expression of political idioms in emergent

regional languages that focused on court elites strongly identified by place. New

appropriations of formerly Sanskrit literatures were adapted for local political expression

between the ninth and eleventh centuries in Kannada and Telugu, languages of the Deccan

plateau, and in Sinhala, Chola, and Javanese.[28]

The relationship between governance and wealth in this great political economic imaginary is

famously treated in the *Arthashastra*, a compendium on statecraft and household governance

assembled by the mid-second century CE, whose core is attributed to Kautilya, a rough

---

[26] Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men, Sanskrit, Culture and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley, 2006).

[27] *Ibid.*, 2-10.

[28] Sheldon Pollock, 'Cosmopolitanism and Vernacular in History', in Carol Breckenridge, Sheldon Pollock, Homi K. Bhabha, and Dipesh Chakrabarty (eds.), *Cosmopolitanism* (Durham, NC, 2002), 30-2.

contemporary of Aristotle working at the court of Chandragupta Maurya.[29] It conjures up a world of multiple competing kingdoms, and advises rulers on such things as diplomacy, espionage and trade, and the management of labour, land and financial resources in the pursuit of war, state security, and public welfare. Lost examples of its genre are known, and its broad ideas informed these and works in adjacent genres, including the Dharmashastra, of which the *Manu Smriti* (*Laws of Manu*) is the best known. We might be seeing a fleeting glimpse of the *Arthashastra*'s influence in the late sixth-century charter of Viṣṇuṣeṇa, a royal confirmation of the customs of a merchant guild, 'in order to protect and settle the countryside, both the previously established [areas] and those which are not'.[30] The *Nitisara* or *Essence of Politics* of Kamandaka, probably written between c.500 and c.700, certainly took up and modified the compendium's content. Kamandaka's ethically prescribed positions on warfare, judicial punishment, and hunting, mark notable departures from his work's classical antecedent. Together they contributed to 'a common stock of ideas and metaphors that became part of a relatively stable classical Indian model of kingship which, with regional and chronological variations, spread beyond the confines of the subcontinent into Southeast Asia as well'.[31]

---

[29] Patrick Olivelle, *King, Governance, and Law in Ancient India: Kautilya's Arthasastra* (Oxford, 2013); Thomas R. Trautman, *Arthashastra*: *The Science of Wealth* (London, 2016).

[30] Timothy Lubin, 'Writing and the Recognition of Customary Law in Premodern India and Java', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, cxxxv (2015), 232.

[31] Upinder Singh, 'Politics, Violence and War in Kamandaka's Nitisara', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xlvii (2010), 58. For its articulation across diverse regions through epigraphic evidence, see Singh, *Kings, Brahmanas and Temples in Orissa, An Epigraphic Study AD 300-1147* (New Delhi, 1994).

Across the second half of the first millennium, at the other end of the Eurasian landmass, in Europe, and parts of North, East and West Africa, Greater Syria, and Iran, and centred on what Garth Fowden calls the 'Eurasian hinge', we witness the interlocutory formation of rabbinical, Christian and Islamic scriptural monotheisms (Map 6). These were characterized by the institutional transmission and reproduction of writing technologies and literacy, the reproduction, storage and interpretation of canonical texts through juridical, grammatical, exegetical, and prophetic techniques, and by the adaptation and literary innovation of, among other genres, history, law-codes, biography, and deeds of princes.[32]

Medieval globality, in sum, was a world of intersecting cultural-political paradigms, determining but also entangled in the activities of inter-regional trade, migration, mission, transcultural communication and production. These typically piggy-backed on the imperial or royal extension of governance and deployment of wealth, and were supported by small-scale projects of accumulation, from piracy and plundering operations to distraint and confiscation. They were sanctioned by purpose-designed legal regimes enforcing debt repayment, and manorialized forms of intensive colonization and cultivation, and by production for the market, driven by local agents of principalities, kingdoms, and empires. These diverse, intersecting, spatio-temporal formations expanded, contracted and fragmented within changing ecological niches, territories and zones, and proved resilient or ephemeral in the face of political challenge and environmental conditions. They intruded almost invariably upon spaces already occupied by more or less self-governing communities rooted in wetlands, forests, hills, steppes, in landscapes demanding of specialist knowledge, skills and forms of

---

[32] Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muhammad The First Millennium Refocused* (Princeton, 2014).

communal organization marginal and resistant to state apparatus.[33] At points of encounter

like these we can begin to talk of processes of multilateral localism, world-making, and the

dynamics of medieval globality.[34]

3. Imaginary to Real: Entanglement and Emergence

The economic imaginaries of medieval globality were not crystallized in particular religious

or philosophical canons. Nor did they represent autarchic societies analogous to civilizations

or nation states. This underlines the sterility of debates over the 'origins of capitalism', and

points to further study of the mytho-poetical properties of these entangled and constantly

emergent traditions, that set ontological parameters across a range of this- and otherworldly

relations in what Marshall Sahlins has called a 'real-politics of the marvelous'.[35] As well as

in the more obvious spheres of trade and conquest, ideas of governance and resource

management spilled over political borders, conceptually and geographically. Examples

include the cosmologically synchronizing pattern of pilgrimage established by Islam at

Mecca, or by Christianity at Jerusalem; the dramatic expansion of twelfth- and thirteenth-

century Cistercian monasticism;[36] or the earlier migration of Brahmanas from the Indus

region to Orissa in the wake of Islamic incursions from the eighth to the twelfth centuries.[37]

All were living traditions connecting different communities and societies, where they were

---

[33] What James C. Scott calls 'shatter zones', for which see *The Art of* Not *Being Governed*

(New Haven, 2010).

[34] For discussion of these and related ideas, see Nathalie Karagiannis, and Peter Wagner

(eds.), *Varieties of World-Making. Beyond Globalization* (Liverpool, 2007), 1-12.

[35] Marshall Sahlins and David Graeber, *On Kings* (Chicago, 2017), 361.

[36] Emilia Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe* (London, 2013).

[37] Singh, *Kings, Brahmanas and Temples*, 294-5.

recruited to serve different practices of endowment, evaluation, and exchange. The transmission of texts and exegetical technologies particularly created wider cognitive and material resources for thinking and acting with, that extended beyond human hierarchies. These traditions were cosmologically expansive, and implicated animals and gods, hidden forces and powers, and they enabled the negotiation, sometimes antagonistically, of local communal interests across social hierarchies, cultural borders and ecological areas. Locally mediated global phenomena in turn sent out tendrils or spores to sites where similar processes were simultaneously unfolding. This idea, of entanglement and emergence, might allow us to think of medieval globality as a distinctive and complex relationship between structure, process, and ontology, cross-cutting and breaking down the bounded spaces, whether physical or metaphorical, with which we usually deal.

Parallel illustrations of how governance, exegetical practice and wealth intersected in Buddhism's transcultural trajectories can be found, for example, in the Tang state's circulation of silk, linen and hemp alongside coin as currency. Officials stamped and shipped these textiles out to the Dunhuang and Turfan frontiers to pay soldiers' salaries, and for military equipment, and fodder for horses. Local traders sold textiles to families who used it to make, among other things, burial furnishings and shrouds. We know this from official expense accounts, and archaeological data from a seventh-century cemetery of Astana, Turfan, where tombs of twenty officials, their wives and concubines reveal stamped cloth. The wife of one official, Lady Dong, has the receipt for the recitation of sutras by Buddhist monks sewn into her shroud, its relatively poor quality signalling 'conscious frugality'.[38]

---

[38] Valerie Hansen and Helen Wang, 'Introduction', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Ser. 3, xxiii (2013), 161.

The kingdom of Khotan and the thalassocracy of Srivijaya were both strategically situated on routes between China, Iran and western Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean. They were elements of a particular phenomenon of multi-local connectedness that Glen Dudbridge has called the 'book road', a network of esoteric Buddhist connections spanning Central, South, East and Southeast Asia. These links may be identified as early as the second century, when Buddhist texts were first transmitted orally between monks from west to east,[39] and then materially by monks like Xuanzang from the seventh to the ninth centuries, when the circulation of books, relics and the religious practices and ritual technologies they engendered, sustained political formations as far removed as Khotan, Sumatra, Samarkand and Silla.[40] What we might call the maritime piracy of Srivijaya sufficiently dominated the Malay Archipelago from the seventh to the twelfth centuries to win recognition as an approved client and tributary state to imperial China.[41] At its height, Srivijaya asserted political control over several port-cities, traded commodities from the Islamic world with China, and was extracting raw materials (camphor, incense, sandalwood, cloves) from upriver communities to supplement its collection of duties and carrying business.[42]

The kingdom of Khotan, between China and Tibet on the southern edge of the Tarim Basin,

---

[39] Tanya Storch, 'Building a Buddhist Canon in Early Medieval China' *The Medieval History Journal*, xviii (2015), 64-86.

[40] See chapter by Glen Dudbridge here.

[41] Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c.800-1830*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, 2009), ii, 772-80; Kenneth R. Hall, *A History of Early Southeast Asia Maritime Trade and Societal Development, 100-1500* (Plymouth, 2011), 109-33.

[42] Søren M. Sindbæk and Athena Trakadus (eds.), *The World in the Viking Age* (Roskilde, 2014), 115-18.

produced jade, silk and paper, and was a religious centre where different Buddhist traditions converged in the person of exiled and pilgrim monks seeking and circulating scrolls.[43] It was probably a major conduit for Buddhism's entry into Tibet in the late eighth and ninth centuries.[44] We learn from Xuanzang, who stayed for several months in the capital Yotkan in 644, that Buddhist monasteries flourished in the seventh century as brokers of knowledge and goods between pilgrims, traders and local populations.[45] Oblate and part-time monks, and skilled craftworkers, were found in workshops, warehouses, and financial centres that provided loans, managed trade, and protected commodities in transit. Local aristocratic schemes that endowed these monasteries with people, land and resources received a blow from King Visya Sihya (736-46 CE), who expelled 'bogus' monks in a campaign against tax evasion.[46] Strikingly, a similar call for the transfer of lands to episcopal control from those who, 'having gained possession of farms and villages, free themselves from every bond, both human and divine', appears in the letter of the king's distant contemporary, Bede, to Bishop Egbert.[47]

The intersection of political ambition, moral authority, and transregional commerce features

---

[43] Susan Whitfield (ed.), *The Silk Road, Travel, Trade, War and Faith* (London, 2004), 134-56.

[44] Richard Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road* (London, 1999), 58.

[45] Sally Wriggins, *The Silk Road Journey with Xuanzang* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), 173-9.

[46] Cristoph Baumer, *The History of Central Asia: The Age of the Silk Roads* (London, 2014), 141-2.

[47] Bede, *Letter to Egbert*, in *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. D. H. Farmer, trans., Leo Sherley-Price (London, 2003).

incidentally in a story preserved in Notger's *Deeds of Charlemagne*.[48] Written in the mid-880s, Notger's biography served an ambitious imperial rhetoric that in Christo-mimetic terms claimed world governance on behalf of Charlemagne and his latest Carolingian successor, Notger's patron, Charles the Fat. Part of the text illustrated Charlemagne's exemplary Christian kingship through his holding of an over-mighty bishop to moral account. Simon Maclean convincingly argues that Notger's unnamed bishop was his and not Charlemagne's contemporary, whom his intended audience would have swiftly recognized as Archbishop Liutbert of Mainz (Map 1). The archbishop had been removed from his office of arch-chancellor when Charles the Fat succeeded his brother Louis the Younger and, if consequently isolated, clearly remained an important player in Carolingian dynastic politics. The Emperor Charlemagne, Notger tells us, heard of this 'vainglorious and inane bishop', and decided to set him a test. He instructed a Jewish merchant – who travelled across the seas, returning often from the Holy Land with wonderful, rare objects – to play a trick on him. The merchant, we are told, 'caught an ordinary house mouse, stuffed it with various spices, wrapped it in silk, and then offered it for sale to the bishop, pretending he had brought it home from Judea'.[49] Each time the bishop offered him more silver, the merchant refused it until the bishop could offer no more than the full measure of silver for this 'most precious item'. Soon after the transaction, Charlemagne called a synod and exposed the bishop as a fool for wasting money on luxuries that Charlemagne had entrusted to him for the support of the poor. The episode belongs to a quartet of stories exposing the bishop to ridicule for his misjudged and inept attempts to recruit symbolic objects and wealth in the performance of princely ecclesiastical lordship. In one he tries to borrow the royal sceptre from the queen for

---

[48] Einhard and Notger the Stammerer, *Two Lives of Charlemagne*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (London, 1969), 108-14.

[49] *Ibid.*, 108.

his own ceremonial purposes. In another, surrounded by his military retainers, he throws an absurdly lavish feast for two royal legates, and bribes them with 'gifts worthy of royalty' in the hope of softening their accounts of his incompetent sermonizing.[50]

In this description of the marketing of 'exotic' goods at the court of a powerful ecclesiastical lord, and in the use of spice and silk, we glimpse prevailing perceptions and tastes for the exotic, even as the story tilts against their grain. Do these details imply that the merchant was attempting to counterfeit a relic? The 'precious and rarely seen' item's Judean provenance and its aroma certainly made it fitting for discernment as an exotic, perhaps even sacred, item. His purchase of the object rehearsed the normative scene of the ecclesiastical lord as patron of the arts, as arbiter of good taste and connoisseur of the world beyond his diocese. But, in its satirical register, it broadcasted his political isolation, greed, and deficient personal ethos.[51] The story is almost a textbook illustration of Pope Gregory the Great's (590-604 CE), advice in his *Pastoral Care* on how to admonish those who misuse wealth entrusted to them.[52] Unfortunately, as his soubriquet signals to posterity, Charles the Fat proved no better a trustee than the bishop in that administration of the divine government of the world that, according to Simon Maclean, Notger was trying to portray for Carolingian rulers.

4. Islamic Globalities

[50] *Ibid.*, 113.

[51] Simon Maclean, *Kingship and Politics in the Late Ninth Century, Charles the Fat and the end of the Carolingian Empire* (Cambridge, 2003), 204-10.

[52] '…[for those who] are appointed for the service of others on whom they bestow what they have received, pride must not on any account inspire their minds with vanity…', Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, ed. and trans. Henry Davies (New York, 1950), 152-4.

The most singular and consequential event of medieval globality, which is only beginning to receive the wider public attention it deserves (and often for the wrong reasons), was the rise of the Islamicate world. The spread of Islam from the Arab peninsula to the Atlantic coast, to Western, Central, South and Southeast Asia, and to parts of Africa, created many and diverse regional experiments from Arabia, to Greater Syria, Iran, the Indo-Islamic world, and to North, West and East Africa, and Transoxania, in what Michael Cook has called the first global culture (Maps 1, 3, 7). Universal across these regions, if diverse in its syncretic regional manifestations, was a political economic imaginary expressed in Arabic. Islamic scriptural elites proved particularly imaginative in their experimentation with those pre-Conquest cosmologies they encountered, among them Judaeo-Christian and Greek, and Zoroastrian and other vernacular Persian cultures. The latter reinvigorated Sunni Islam in an ebbing tenth- and eleventh-century Abbasid empire, and from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries fed a religious culture different again to that of either the Abbasids or Iberian Umayyads in its interactions with Sanskrit vernaculars in South Asia and beyond.[53] Cook presents the silver coin or *dirham* as supremely emblematic of global Islam. These were produced with some consistency over thousands of miles and featured a resounding declaration of God's authority inscribed on them in the language of the Qur'an.[54] But

---

[53] Michael Cook, 'The Centrality of Islamic Civilization', in Benjamin Kedar and Merry Wiesner-Hanks (eds.), *The Cambridge World History: Volume V, Expanding Webs of Exchange and Conflict, 500 CE–1500 CE* (Cambridge, 2015), 385-414; André Wink, *Al-Hind. The Making of the Indo-Islamic World, Vol. 1, Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam 7th–11th Centuries* (Leiden, 2002), 20-4.

[54] Michael Cook, 'Islam: History's First Shot at Global Culture?' in Donald Yerxa (ed.), *Recent Themes in World History and the History of the West, Historians in Conversation* (Columbia, SC, 2009), 46-52.

Qur'anic inscription also appeared on other cultural media, whether in the decorative patterns of the *tiraz* system,[55] or in monumental contexts. At the West African Songhay-Mande meeting point of Bentyia in modern Niger, Arabic inscriptions of the later thirteenth to fifteenth centuries reveal communities of Muslims served by the *khatib* and the *wazir*, who among other things brokered relationships with indigenous cultures, organizing everyday forms of coexistence and exchange around practices that drew upon the empowering connections that Islamic networks made possible.[56]

The preeminence of the Qur'an as moral justification for Islamic worldly authority and the responsibilities attached to the stewardship and dispensation of its revenues – including taxation,[57] plunder, agricultural produce, charity, and commercial tolls – were the subject of the *Book of Revenue* (*Kitab al-Amwal*), a detailed legal collection of Qur'anic precedent and juridical tradition assembled in the ninth century by Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam.[58] The work is not concerned with mapping social relations in terms of an agrarian world order, but

[55] Liu Xinru, *Silk and Religion: An Exploration of Material Life and the Thought of People, AD 600-1200* (Oxford, 1998), 141-9.

[56] Paolo de Moraes Farias, 'Bentyia (Kukyia): a Songhay–Mande Meeting Point, and a "Missing Link" in the Archaeology of the West African Diasporas of Traders, Warriors, Praise-Singers, and Clerics', *Afriques: debats, methodes et terrains d'histoire*, iv (2013), 58-9.

[57] Including the *jizya*, a poll tax charged on all *dhimmis*, non-Muslim male adults consequently under protected status, see Jonathan Berkey, *The Formation of Islam Religion and Society in the Near East* (Cambridge, 2003), 161-3.

[58] Abu Ubayd al-Qasim ibn Sallam, *Kitab al-Amwal: The Book of Revenue*, trans. Imran Nyazee (Reading, 2003).

rather with the moral accountability and financial responsibilities of the faithful. It enlists all the faithful in a pastoral role, giving them responsibility for justice in matters of political and material wealth.[59] The theme of protection, trust and moral obligation attached to Muslim religious practice was extended from the ruler as shepherd of the ruled, to the domestic sphere, where women were seen as shepherds of their children and families alongside (and therefore explicitly protected from the plunder and rapine of), conquering Muslim armies.

5. Conquest and Coexistence

An important dynamic of medieval globality was conquest and colonization. Aspirant rulers, upon conquering territories, needed to contract socially with local institutions. The tombs and shrines of holy men and women were useful for auditioning elites, preserving communal solidarities, and for safeguarding mechanisms of internal order. Cults offered holy quarantine, and immunity. They were places of negotiation, where earthly authority might be suspended, and counter-imaginary power voiced through supernatural power displayed in vibrant, sacred matter.

An example of this is the story of William Duke of Normandy's invasion of the Isle of Ely in 1071, which had been the scene of a 'last stand' of English lords.[60] Through the littered bodies of the English dead and body parts (feet, hands, eyes) of the punished captives, William, 'approached the monastery, gave instructions to a large force to guard the doors and entrances of the church, his aim being that when he went there to pray, there should be no

---

[59] To be contrasted, interestingly, with Augustine's association of legitimacy with the state, 'Remove justice and what are kingdoms but gangs of criminals on a large scale?', in IV.4 of his *City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London, 1984), 139.

[60] *The Liber Eliensis*, ed. Janet Fairweather (Woodbridge, 2005), 229-31.

means of access for the monks to seek him out or come to meet him in the appropriate supplicatory guise with crosses and the relics of the saints'.[61] William's first encounter with St Aethelthryth, the patron saint of Ely, would be direct, on his terms, and, according to the account, hesitant: 'standing a long way from the holy body of the virgin, he threw a gold mark on to the altar, not daring to approach closer, he was afraid of having judgment passed on him by God for the evils which his men perpetrated in the place'. What are we to make of this scene?

The account tells us William was in a state of fear when approaching the shrine, anxious that his moral condition exposed him to the judgment of God. Perhaps (the inference seems intended) the monks could have secured proper introductions had he allowed them to approach him with crosses and relics. On the other hand, was that how it really happened? We might reasonably imagine a conqueror awash with testosterone, confidently controlling the space he has just taken, by locking the monks out of their own church and placing himself between them and their beloved Aethelthryth, and by lobbing a gold coin in the general direction of the shrine. The scene recalls Geertz on the interpretation of actions and their meanings, 'a speck of behavior, a fleck of culture, and *voilà,* a gesture'.[62] William's toss of the coin is presented to us as a *twitch*, an involuntary reaction to the shrine motivated by fear and awe. But could it have been a *wink*, or a perfunctory nod to the saint's local fame? William the Bastard, the respecter of indigenous rights? Whatever St Aethelthryth meant to the English and to him, William had put the monastic custodians of her cult on probation. The monks of Ely eventually bought their way back into his favour through the mediation of Gilbert de Clare, the member of a Norman family close to William that was interested in East

---

[61] *Ibid.*, 229.

[62] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 6.

Anglian real estate. A payment of what turned out to be 1000 silver marks was raised through the surrender to royal agents and moneyers, presumably where appropriate for melting down, of 'crosses, altars, reliquaries, [gospel-books], chalices, patens, lavers, stoups, bowls and gold and silver dishes.'[63] This was a pretty neat arrangement: the expedient destruction and de-consecration of precious ornaments and utensils that were presumably redolent of the old regime, and the beginning of a beautiful friendship with St Aethelthryth's powerful new neighbours.

We might compare this with other forms of encounter between aspirant rulers seeking to consolidate their control of newly conquered territories, and indigenous sacred champions, whether saints' relics, shrines dedicated to deities, or 'idols'. Such encounters involved new entanglements between communities, conversions across value regimes communicated through the negotiation of new material and spatial arrangements, the striking of new forms of accommodation and coexistence through gift exchange, the de- and re-consecration of sacred objects, or their destruction and repurposing.

Take the Muslim Turkic insurgencies from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries from Iran and Afghanistan into the Indus valley (Map 6). Modern scholars of South Asia have debated the reliability of historical accounts like that of Al-Biruni (c.1030)[64] of the scale and violence of these temple raids.[65] André Wink calls these sacred plundering raids 'a religious

---

[63] *Liber Eliensis*, p.230.

[64] *Alberuni's India*, 2 vols., ed. and trans., Edward Sachau (Cambridge, repr. 2012), ii, 102-3.

[65] For the historiographical and politico-cultural legacy of Mahmud's raid on Somnath, see Romila Thapar, *Somanatha* (London, 2005), and Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, 1997), 186-221.

phenomenon of the frontier'.[66] More recently Azfar Moin has pointed out that the textbook practice of Hindu rulers such as King Indra III of the tenth century, which could be consulted in advice manuals, was to destroy the temples of rival kings.[67] Moin interestingly goes on to argue that Turkic violence against shrines was motivated by a growing astrological conviction that sovereignty was deserting the Caliphate and could be found relocated in the tombs of Sufi saints. Plundering expeditions thus cleared complex social spaces for new forms of local patronage, secured huge amounts of bullion presumably to pay off armies and keep campaigns afloat, and worked in a transcultural context of juxtaposed value regimes involving Indic kingship and Turkic-Sufi sovereignty. While in previous centuries, 'idols' might be plundered, and sent to Baghdad as gifts to the Caliph with, as Finbarr Flood comments, the effect of 'making distance tangible',[68] their de-thesaurization kept money and patronage flowing in local, cross-cultural exchange. These expeditions were indeed accompanied by an inward-migration of Sufis from the Iranian plateau who, according to subsequent hagiographies, engaged in close-quartered spiritual tournaments with Hindu *yogis*, from one location to the next across the sacred Hindu landscape.

Shahid Amin characterizes this as a kind of composite of two religious cultures, entangled

---

[66] André Wink, 'The Idols of Hind', in Finbarr Flood (ed.), *Piety and Politics in the Early Indian Mosque* (Oxford, 2008), 29.

[67] Azfar Moin, 'Sovereign Violence: Temple Destruction in India and Shrine Desecration in Iran and Central Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, lvii (2015), 469.

[68] Finbarr Flood, *Objects of Translation. Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter* (Princeton, 2009), 28. Of course, time-space compression is seen as one of the unique hallmarks of modern globalization, Martin Pitts and Miguel Versluys, *Globalization and the Roman World* (Cambridge, 2014), 12.

not fused, dissolved or 'resolved', and worked out open-endedly through continuous ongoing reconfigurations of sectarian loyalties and compromises based on working arrangements that surface in later literature.[69] The tomb of one such enduringly famous warrior saint, Syed Salar Masud, a relative of Mahmud Ghazni who was martyred in 1034, aged nineteen (according to his improbably well informed sixteenth-century biographer), is located at Bahraich (in North East Uttar Pradesh, Map 3). Ibn Battuta recalls being brought there by the Delhi Sultan Tughluq in 1341, among other things presumably to document the esteem with which he was held by the people of this provincial backwater of his empire.[70]

Conclusion

These brief sketches of the cultural plurality that Abu-Lughod identified as characteristic of the medieval world system hardly do justice to the diverse ways in which each mediated between on the one hand cosmological drama, or to the complexities and contingencies of local processes of socio-economic and political reproduction, and on the other hand the formation of ethnic and religious identities in conditions of coexistence and, at times, conquest. But a broader consideration of political economy at this scale of the economic imaginary disrupts the deceptively tidier assumptions about the global middle ages that reside in the language of civilization, world religion, nation, economy, and individual. Such a reframing also allows us to uncouple and historicize familiar political and religious formations upon whose long term historical determinism we have customarily attached undue emphasis. It permits discussion of internal contradiction and subjunctive possibilities, and differentiation within emic categories, which allow us to explore how people were permitted

---

[69] Shahid Amin, *Conquest and Community. The Afterlife of Warrior Saint Ghazi Miyan* (Chicago, 2015), 5-8.

[70] *Ibid.*, 10.

or encouraged to think with and enact literary and cultural forms, how consent was articulated, how values were transmitted through given expressions that implicated bodies, texts and objects.[71]

This chapter has offered a few preliminary thoughts on the properties of medieval – 'late premodern', 'very early modern' or even, we might say, 'Time B' – globality, to offer clues for the study of such a globality's historical dynamics. Liberal historicism has often misrepresented or ignored non-western experiences of the global premodern – including its various temporalities and cosmologies, the political valences of peasant and subaltern magical consciousness, astrology and occultism – because such phenomena have exceeded historicism's analytical and explanatory parameters.[72] Further study of medieval globalities can help to show how the building blocks of modern political economic frameworks have older, globally-entangled genealogies. In these frames, the close supervision of money production and the regulation of markets and exchange were implicated in a wider human economy in which polities interacted with diffuse institutions and communities, where concrete forms of sovereignty and immunity, divine assistance, theodicy and providence, were realized through mixed evaluative practices. There is a productive tension in current

[71] Finbarr Flood, 'Ghurid Monuments and Muslim Identities: Epigraphy and Exegesis in Twelfth-Century Afghanistan', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, xlii (2005), 263-94.

[72] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2000), and see Tom McCaskie on this in *State and Society in Asante* (Cambridge, 1995). See also Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Of Imarat and Tijarat: Asian Merchants and State Power in the Western Indian Ocean, 1400 to 1750', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, xxxvii (1995), 750-80.

anthropological debates between structural and relational interpretations of these kinds of entanglements. We might explore this tension through studies of structures and ontologies in the global middle ages[73] – so far as they provide what Lauren Benton calls a way of treating 'cultural process and the global economy as inextricably linked' – and by exploring what Sheldon Pollock calls that 'dialectic between global and local in which both are brought into being simultaneously and continuously'.[74]

---

[73] Frederick Cooper, 'What is the Concept of Globalization Good for? An African Historian's Perspective', *African Affairs*, c, (2001), 189-213; Benedetta Rossi, 'Dependence, Unfreedom and Slavery in Africa: Towards an Integrated Analysis', *Africa*, lxxxvi, (2016), 571-90.

[74] Lauren Benton, 'From the World-Systems Perspective to Institutional World History: Culture and Economy in Global Theory', *Journal of World History*, vii (1996), 262; Sheldon Pollock, 'Cosmopolitanism, Vernacularism, and Premodernity', in Samuel Moyn and Andrew Sartori (eds.), *Global Intellectual History* (New York, 2013), 60.